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Lightfoot

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The rosary blessed by John Paul still swayed gently back and forth when the Driver shut off the beat-up old Buick. The Driver's mother, a devout part-time Catholic, had given it to her oldest son as a Christmas gift in 1990, and now I couldn't stop staring at it from inside the car, remembering the story the Driver told endlessly about how his mother performed a minor miracle in getting the Pope's attention. I can still recall the Driver's modest arrogance, a touch of vanity maybe, at owning such a spiritually valuable prize. Yet in an instant, the rosary's hold on me evaporates, the night's initial euphoria (a girl's parents are out of town) quickly gives way to confusion as the reflection in the rearview mirror explodes into blue and red lights. The lights also reflect softly on the crucifix, and although I didn't know it then, the end of the month is an especially busy time for law enforcement in Texas. These lights belong to the Harris County Sheriff's Department and they have quotas to fill. The Driver notices the unwanted attention and can only muster a simple quick response: "Fuck! ... everyone be cool ..."

All the emotions tied to those memories come over me and for a split-second I hesitate; I momentarily stop typing so I can close my eyes and refocus as the thought of the lights distracts me again, like it did so long ago. From far away I vaguely make out that initial click ... and then a second sound ... followed by many more ... compulsively ... click, click, click, click ... and the hairs on the back of my neck begin to tingle ...

In the backseat of the old Buick, I instinctively begin *The Lord's Prayer*, which I learned during football season, while the Constable's flashlight continues to click schizophrenically. I stop mid-sentence as I hear the unmistakable Southern twang, and although I can't quite make out what is said, in the dark of night the drawl is unexpectedly frightening. I imagine that the sequence of questions, although I've heard them only on TV, will seem unfortunately all too recognizable. The Constable will pronounce them slowly, as a means of prolonging the situation: "Where you going, boys?" ... "Can I check the trunk?" ... "Anything you need to tell me before I

look?" The questions will conclude with a condescending: "Y'all sure?"

Driven by the department's economic incentives, the Constable's clicking flashlight stops at the back of the rusty Buick—no doubt he is looking at the expired license plate tags. The focus of the light back into the car, and then disappearing and returning, can only suggest that he is sizing up all the baseball caps. I sit there and I can't get over the sheer disbelief of being pulled over at the exact moment that we arrived, as if he'd been there waiting for us. I go back to the prayer, only because I don't want to leave it unfinished—it seems rude to me for some reason. Silently I enjoy the commotion, but only because I'm innocent. Now that I'm writing this, I'm embarrassed to confess that the thought of handcuffs digging into my wrists seemed fascinating—but only because I'm innocent. From the darkness, we hear a voice for the first time: "Inside the vehicle ... hands where I can see them ..." I was expecting the Constable to start with the other questions, but this command isn't too surprising.

I can hear the footsteps again; the Constable approaches the Driver's window just as I finish the prayer. The window is partially open because the air-conditioning in the discolored Buick doesn't work very well. The flickering of the flashlight has stopped, for now, and the Constable's words are just as I remember them from TV. He breezes through the questions leisurely, arriving at each question precisely when he wants to, all the while moving the flashlight back and forth from the Driver's face to the registration forms and the passengers. Each time he changes focus he blinds us with the flashlight. Then the sweat begins to pour down ... we sweat profusely as the light magnifies the humid Texas heat, which soaks us in guilt, as nervous sweat does. I imagine the Constable smirks as his grip on us tightens. As I play out the scene in my mind, I remember the he's not alone, they never are, and the other's presence is felt. I clench my eyes tighter and continue to pound the computer keys as I remember.

The action starts again. Ceremoniously, the Constables exchange roles. Their intensity varies as the barrage of commands begins; these first words are for the Driver.

The first Constable orders the Driver to slowly exit the car. He must keep both hands steady as the first Constable opens the Buick's door. The door creaks loudly as he forces it open. He instructs the Driver to follow the sound of his voice, since the flashlight is firmly fixed on the Driver's eyes. As best as he can, the Driver obeys, knowing that if he slips or makes any uneasy move, the Constable's good humor could disappear. Once it's my turn to step through the door, I follow the hypnotic pull at the end of the tunnel of light; there the friendly Texas drawl assures me: "For your own safety, I'm putting you in the backseat of the car while we finish talking to your friends." For my own safety, the first Constable forces my face onto the still hot hood of the Buick while he very cautiously tightens the damp handcuffs on my sweaty wrists.

In the backseat of the squad car, I adjust to the constricting handcuffs—they aren't as exciting as I hoped they would be—and I notice that my heart is racing. I want to ask why my safety is in question. I want to inquire about what we've done. The words begin to form in my throat, but I don't speak. I simply don't dare. Strangely enough, the night concerto of Texas crickets has gone mute. I notice the silence. I concentrate on slowing my breathing down, and I close my eyes and immediately see the rosary again, softly swaying back and forth from the rearview mirror, but the other's voice shatters everything: "Shit, boy! Why you hanging with these Mexicans? Look at the trouble they got you in!"

I waver for a moment because I'm not sure the voice is actually speaking to me—however this is the first time I think of us as being in trouble. I thought we were innocent. My mind's racing—I struggle to keep up. I assumed the entire episode, maybe because it seems so familiar, was only routine, a rounding-up of the usual suspects, but now I fear something more serious is happening. I hear my voice speak up, but I realize the thoughts never leave my mouth: Are we in trouble? My friends aren't Mexican ... they're Mexican-Americans. They don't even speak Spanish. But I know that doesn't really matter right now, not to us, not to anyone; but especially not to *THEM* ... we're all Mexican enough right now ...

Even as I type this, the Texas heat radiates all around, concentrating on the back of my neck, and now I'm drained. The initial excitement is dead, my hands are numb, so I lean forward to alleviate the pain. I still recall the sweat, the stench of the squad car and the sensation

of drops racing down my back. All I really want now is to go home ...

The first Constable approaches and I see his face emerge, ominous from behind the light with his name badge so prominent and metallic. The badge reads *Lightfoot*. Not like the others I've known before, his face is angular, pronounced and very young. For a moment, I think that the name contradicts the blond hair and the blue eyes, but that doesn't matter at this point. I can hear the questions cascading before they leave Lightfoot's mouth, and he asks about my pockets. I don't know what's in them and my ignorance angers him.

I'm laboring for breath. The other one is very near, my friends have disappeared, I don't hear them anymore ... I can't hear anything. I can't breathe, I try to pray again, something new, but I only return to one thought: home. Surely they know something about me that I don't know: maybe credit cards, maybe alcohol, maybe anything—in the dark no one sees much and in the Texas humidity many before me have ended up lost in the brush. I resign myself to fate ... my background check won't come back clean ...

My mind continues to race and the other one's contrived accent distracts me only for a second. From nowhere, Lightfoot's voice has inched closer to me; the squad car's door is open. I'm unprepared and instinctively turn but my eyes are blinded by the light again. Lightfoot's fascinated—he orders me to look at him: I struggle to keep my eyes open and the light only worsens the redness. I can remember his whisper: "Them eyes sure are red, boy ..." I can't make out if it's a question, so I sit quietly. Now the other's voice chimes in. I impulsively turn. I smell my own skin oozing chlorine, sweat and cheap Old Spice cologne. My answer is timid ... but they don't hear anyway: "I've been in the pool all day."

My face with its ridiculous smirk is not well received, their demeanor is changing. The mixture of frustration and disappointment pushes through their voices. Mercifully, the first background check on the shoulder mic comes through clearly: "One Joshua Maciel, no 10-98, no criminal history, no priors, no outstanding warrants."

I think we're all "no 10-98," except me ... but they haven't asked for my ID. Did they? It's already been a long time I feel, and I imagine the girls must've noticed the commotion outside. From the backseat of the squad car, I hear the shoulder mic explode again: "Attention all

officers, 10-71, officer needs assistance, possible *B* and *E* at the 11,000 block of Airline Drive. Repeat ...”

The Constables intuitively change direction. The lights are chaotic again moving back and forth from the squad car and the neglected Buick. They need to get rid of us. I don’t dare move, I know better, but I don’t want to be forgotten—I feel as if I’m swaying myself. A sympathetic hand reaches in and pulls me back into the darkness; I can’t make out the voices because the Constable’s urgency has once again awakened all my senses. I’m slammed against the squad car’s trunk and after the initial commotion I notice my hands recovering sensation. The same kind hands push me away and I lose the voice’s last commands ...

Behind me, I make out muffled orders to return home. I want the Constables to drive me home; the heat has drained me. I want to sleep, and I think that I’ve been fortunate—my mother always prays for me. As they enter their car, I feel the full weight of my exhaustion, my dry mouth, and a blistering need to drink. I’m disappointed, but I can’t understand why. Someone mumbles something that everyone else finds amusing, but I miss it completely. I’m fixated on the squad car’s red brake lights, the siren and the firework of lights, overkill inside this neglected neighborhood, I feel. If I was more assertive, I’d demand to go home, but in typical fashion I wait for the group to lead me away ...

We walk, single-file, towards Jodie’s door. I want to go home, but I know that’s impossible since secretly I need to hear Jodie’s raspy voice, and I’ve waited to meet her friend Valerie forever. I’m torn between telling them about the handcuffs, the humid backseat and the smell of blood back there, and wanting to tell my mother that I tried to pray inside the car, not the *Lord’s Prayer* but my own ...

As the group approached the house, I was certain that it was so late that everyone had left. In the day time the house was vibrant, but at night the humidity settled in and bright colors gave way to grey. The two girls inside the home knew that the Constables had been sitting in the dark, waiting for any passing car, and while they knew each night was good for entertainment and a light show, they also understood that if the Constables became too loud, Jodie’s parents would stop leaving on weekends.

Approaching the grey house, I see that the tattered door opens on its own, and no one is there to greet us. My friends march in one at a time, and I get the impression

of stepping into a wooden mouth. The vestibule is a syncretic museum of ceramic Aztec calendars, a Day of the Dead *calavera*, and a panoramic portrait of the Virgin of Guadalupe adorns the back wall of the family room. On the opposite wall, the eyes of the Sacred Heart Jesus undress the guilt in me the Constables overlooked. I would love to hide and I see a dark corner where I could crouch, but I don’t have the determination to run there. I stare frozenly at Jesus and in my mind the Constables’ car is weaving through the mosquitos and humidity back to Jodie’s street, waiting for us.

I stop typing abruptly, but I keep my eyes closed, because I see myself there 20 years ago, skinny, exhausted, transfixed by the eyes of the Sacred Heart Jesus. I can see myself wearing oversized pants and cheap knockoff Adidas sneakers. I notice that as a familiar song begins to play from somewhere in the house, I smile. I remember that for an instant, facing the Jesus on the wall, I was sure *HE* existed long ago.